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AUTHOR	Wagner, Daniel A.
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ABSTRACT

Available evidence suggests that Islamic (or Quranic) schools, as the primary contemporary example of indigenous schooling, have made major changes in various countries where they remain active. These include changes in the nature of instruction, style of teaching, and teacher corps. In general, these changes have been made in response to social and economic demands and may be thought of as supporting the overall process of development while simultaneously supporting the needs of the various Islamic communities where the schools are situated. In terms of children's learning, evidence suggests that, where such schools take the form of preschooling or after-school (parallel) classes, this additional education is of substantial value to children who do not or cannot attend secular government primary schools, and it would be of value to children who may already attend some form of government primary schooling. Teachers and classrooms are often supported by a combination of donations from individual patrons and from the Muslim community. Although exact figures are unavailable, indigenous schools unquestionably cost a small fraction of what a government school would cost for an equivalent number of hours of teaching on a per pupil basis. Substantial improvements could be made in these schools if an appropriate and sensitive investment strategy were established. (YLB)

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Indigenous Education and Literacy Learning

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Indigenous Education and Literacy Learning

Daniel A. Wagner
University of Pennsylvania

Author Biography

Daniel A. Wagner is Professor of Education and Director of the International Literacy Institute (ILI). He is also Director of the National Center on Adult Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. in educational psychology at the University of Michigan, was a two-year postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute of Education Planning in Paris, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Geneva (Switzerland).

Abstract

Dramatic world economic changes have led many developing countries to reassess their varied educational programs as well as the costs and benefits that pertain to them. Some specialists have focused their attention on the relationship between education and functional literacy as primary forces behind labor productivity and economic development, while others have sought to understand the internal efficiency of the entire educational system. Still others have argued that alternative educational programs—beyond those of the formal public sector—are the best way to reach those most in need of additional training and are the most cost effective. Nonformal educational programs have achieved a certain amount of credibility in developing countries, but few of these programs have been based (at least in contemporary times) on indigenous forms of schooling. This paper reviews the scope and possibilities of such forms of schooling, with a particular focus on literacy learning and instruction in Africa and the Middle East. Attention will also be given to how indigenous schools can constitute a potentially cost-effective way of reaching more students, and teaching basic skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Dramatic world economic changes have led many developing countries to reassess their varied educational programs as well as the costs and benefits that pertain to them. Some specialists have focused their attention on the relationship between education and functional literacy as primary forces behind labor productivity and economic development, while others have sought to understand the internal efficiency of the entire educational system. Still others have argued that alternative educational programs—beyond those of the formal public sector—are the best way to reach those most in need of additional training and are the most cost effective. Nonformal educational programs have achieved a certain amount of credibility in developing countries, but few of these programs have been based (at least in contemporary times) on indigenous forms of schooling. This paper reviews the scope and possibilities of such forms of schooling, with a particular focus on literacy learning and instruction in Africa and the Middle East. Attention will also be given to how indigenous schools can constitute a potentially cost-effective way of reaching more students, and teaching basic skills.

INDIGENOUS FORMS OF EDUCATION

The introduction of government primary schools by the European colonial powers in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere is sometimes seen as having occurred in an educational vacuum. While such colonial schools competed with, displaced, and even destroyed the pre-colonial systems of schooling, indigenous schooling has survived into contemporary times in numerous parts of the world. For the present paper, the term "indigenous" is meant to refer to any formalized (that is, culturally codified, recognized, and/or authorized) system of instruction that is not a direct descendant of modern European public schooling. These surviving indigenous systems generally have been overlooked in the rush to modernize and Westernize education in the developing world.

Early European schooling, based on religious tradition, actually had much in common with current indigenous schools, and made extensive use of traditional pedagogical methods. In Christian as well as Jewish schools, the focus of early European education was on memorizing sacred texts during lengthy periods of study with a single teacher. Early years of study emphasized rote learning, while later years included in-depth understanding of texts through the student's apprenticeship to a given master. Students were not age-graded as in modern primary school classrooms but, rather, learned a set of required texts through a tutorial process in which the teacher provided tasks as a function of each student's abilities and accomplishments (Street, 1984; Wagner & Lotfi, 1980). In addition, traditional schooling provided "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1973) or "credentialing" in terms of a body of knowledge important for the child's successful functioning in the society as well as for future social status. In this latter respect, traditional and modern forms of schooling have much in common.

Although European religious-oriented education has declined dramatically over the centuries, indigenous education and traditional pedagogy have flourished in many parts of the Third World. Buddhist traditional pedagogy has been maintained in numerous Asian countries (Gurugé, 1985), African bush schools are still common in West Africa (Erny, 1972), and traditional literacies occasionally flourish where local economic and social needs develop (e.g., the Vai in Liberia; cf. Scribner & Cole, 1981). While there are numerous types of religious indigenous schools, and considerable similarities amongst them, the most widespread contemporary example of indigenous education and traditional pedagogy in the world is almost certainly that of Islamic education.

ISLAMIC SCHOOLING IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Islamic (or Quranic) schools are among the least studied educational institutions in today's world, even though millions of children in dozens of countries attend such schools for either part or all of their education. In a comparative study of Islamic schooling in Indonesia, North Yemen, Senegal, Morocco, and Egypt, substantial diversity was found in these schools, both across and within societies (Wagner, 1989). In spite of a common emphasis on the study of Quranic texts, which provides a similar focus for Islamic schooling across the world, Quranic schools have adapted to a variety of cultural constraints within each society, leading to important differences in Quranic schooling across various societies. For example, Islamic schooling in Indonesia (which, with over 100 million Muslims, is the world's most populous Islamic society and sends over 20 million children to Islamic schools each year) superseded an earlier Buddhist system, yet still maintains some of its features, including a long-term apprenticeship and the attribution of mystical powers to the religious teacher. By contrast, many children in Yemen go through only three to five years of Quranic schooling, and the Quranic teacher, beyond instructing children, often serves as a legal arbiter in his village because he is the single literate person who can read documents to adjudicate legal disputes.

Also important is the fact that Quranic schools can vary dramatically within societies, primarily as a function of the last several decades of modernization (Wagner, 1985). In Morocco, where almost 80% of all children attend Quranic schools for some period of time, the traditional schools for older children are disappearing, while the "modernized" Quranic preschools, which sometimes employ teachers with public high school diplomas, are attracting more young children than ever before. One important reason for this increase in attendance is the participation of girls, who were once excluded from such schools. In Senegal, where girls have often attended Quranic schools (in contrast to Yemen), modernization has led to significant changes in pedagogy and curriculum. Rather than emphasizing rote learning of Arabic texts, which are not understood by children who speak only Senegalese languages, many Quranic school teachers are now trying to teach spoken and written Arabic as a second language. Changes such as those found in Morocco and Senegal are taking place in many parts of the Islamic world, as people adapt to changing societal pressures.

Contemporary Islamic education provides perhaps the most important example of indigenous education in today's world. The Islamic school system, which remained relatively static over many centuries, has now begun to undergo significant changes, which vary from society to society. The point to be emphasized here is that Islamic schools, like other indigenous schools, continue to attract very large numbers of children, many of whom never attend governmental secular schools. Such indigenous schools may be seen as an important educational resource. This is so, at least in part, because the "reach" of indigenous schooling penetrates deeper and perhaps more effectively than many government systems into the poorest, most traditional, and least accessible regions of the countries concerned.

However, access to indigenous schooling would not be considered to be of much utility if one could assume that such schools provided little relevant instruction of skills thought to be important for national development. As it happens, many indigenous schools provide (often as a by-product of religious training) important language, cognitive, and social skills of significant potential for meeting basic skills needs of poor and disadvantaged populations in many countries.

LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION IN INDIGENOUS SCHOOLS

Literacy acquisition in indigenous schools was first extensively explored in a volume by Goody (1968). Literacy instruction has been shown to be an important product of Quranic schooling, but, as noted earlier, literacy and other aspects of instruction are known to vary substantially across teachers, schools, and societies. Traditionally, instruction in Quranic schooling has included a number of features of literacy instruction: oral memorization of the Quran, emphasis on correct (that is, accurate and aesthetic) oral recitation, training in the Arabic script, and strict authoritarian instruction. In contrast to primers used in virtually all modern secular schools, literacy instruction with the Quran as text provided no opportunity for age-graded vocabulary or grammatical structures. In addition, the illustrations that most primers use to facilitate reading are strictly prohibited for religious reasons in Islamic schools. Thus, it is hardly surprising that learning to read by using the Quran as a primer was and is not a trivial task for many children.

Nonetheless, both the most traditional and somewhat modernized contemporary Quranic schools also share a number of common basic features with modern secular schools. Despite regional variation, Quranic schools can be said to teach children how to learn in a structured setting, respect the teacher, use language and recite in unison, encode and decode an alphabet, become a moral person and a good citizen, and, more recently, do basic arithmetic. Of course, such features can also be found in most secular preschool and primary school settings in developing countries. However, the sacred quality of the text and the strong motivation of children and parents towards Quranic learning may provide an additional stimulus for learning that many secular school systems cannot match.

Although we know that literacy acquisition and other forms of learning take place in Islamic schools, reliable statistics are generally unavailable on the actual degree of learning achievement among children in most societies where indigenous schools still function. One exception is a five-year longitudinal study carried out in Morocco. This project sought to explore the consequences of attendance in Quranic preschools for learning and subsequent public school achievement. One notable finding was that Quranic preschooling was a significant factor in promoting children's literacy during the early grades of public primary school (when compared with children with no preschooling); the influence was most apparent in the rural environment and for children whose native language was Berber (Wagner, 1993). Also of interest was the fact that the cognitive (learning) impact of Quranic preschooling was basically equivalent to modern preschooling in the same Moroccan communities.

One additional question concerns the use of Arabic literacy in Muslim societies where Arabic is not widely spoken or considered to be a national language. There remains considerable skepticism about the possibility of teaching literacy skills in each child's vernacular tongue on a large-scale basis. In contrast to the typical case of imposing a European language on a multilingual traditional society, Arabic literacy has the advantage of being already firmly embedded in the cultural fabric of societies with significant Muslim populations, such as in the cases of West African countries. Of course, the choice of the national language of literacy and of public school instruction remains a political one, and one that often embodies considerable cultural and individual sensitivities.

In such societies, the functions of literacy cannot be uniquely defined by governments or agencies, since many indigenous literacies have histories that go back several centuries and are likely to continue well into the future. Rather than viewing indigenous education and indigenous literacies as impediments to, or competitors with, development policies, national planners would do well to consider such literacies as resources. The reality is that, for a real and substantial portion of the world's children, lit-

eracy skills are acquired in indigenous schools. And, if literacy is thought to be a central development goal, then the question ought not be "Should indigenous literacy count?," but rather, "How can we reinforce useful learning contexts already in place, and build them into a long-term plan for human resource development?" While sensitive political questions often arise with respect to indigenous and religious schooling, it is important not to ignore the potential benefits for learning that might accrue to a policy of comprehensive educational inclusion.

POLICY ISSUES AND OPTIONS

What may we conclude in the way of policy options from this brief overview of alternative schooling systems? First, the available evidence suggests that Islamic schools, as the primary contemporary example of indigenous schooling, have made major changes in various countries where they remain active—changes in the nature of instruction, style of teaching, and in the teacher corps itself (Wagner & Lotfi, 1982). In general, these changes have been made in response to social and economic demands, and thus may be thought of as supporting the overall process of development, though at the same time supporting the needs of the various Islamic communities where the schools are situated.

Second, in terms of children's learning, the evidence available suggests that where such schools take the form of preschooling or afterschool (parallel) classes, there is reason to believe that this additional education will be of substantial value to children who do not or cannot attend secular government primary schools, and that it would also be of value to children who may already attend some form of government primary schooling. Conversely, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that indigenous school learning has a negative effect on secular school learning.

Third, the fiscal base of indigenous schooling varies as a function of the type of school and local cultural context. With respect to Islamic schools, teachers and classrooms are often supported by a combination of donations from individual parents and from the Muslim community. While exact figures are unavailable, there can be little question that indigenous schools cost a small fraction of what a government school would cost for an equivalent number of hours of teaching on a per pupil basis.

Fourth, although the development utility of indigenous schools in their present form can be debated, few would doubt that substantial improvements could be made in these schools if an appropriate and sensitive investment strategy were established. In the few cases where modest interventions have occurred (such as in Morocco, with Unicef support), there have been major improvements in both quality of instruction and learning.

CONCLUSION

It is argued that such indigenous forms of schooling may be useful in the support of literacy development, and as a complement to government primary school institutions in many countries. Indigenous schooling and indigenous forms of literacy are the norm rather than the exception in some of the poorest nations of the world. The continuing failure of most development agencies to consider the importance of this network of indigenous schools is surprising in light of the difficulties in achieving universal primary schooling that is effective for promoting basic literacy skills. It would seem that the time has come to consider the reinforcement of these indigenous institutions, which have stood the test of centuries of time, but which have largely been ignored by modern educational planners. ■

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